

Research Report for the India China Institute

## **Enter The Bad Object: Space-Making Practices by Chinese in New York**

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*I extend my gratitude to the India China Institute for awarding me the student fellowship, enabling me to return to China to conduct my inaugural interview and formulate the concept for this project. The funding served as the crucial foundation for this project, and it is with great enthusiasm that I present my research proposal.*

### **Project Description:**

*Enter The Bad Object* is a creative research project that delves into the methods by which the Chinese community in New York participates in the creation of spaces through diverse organizational approaches. The current emphasis is on cultural organizations, and as part of this endeavor, we will produce a paper-based art publication and a website to disseminate our interview documentation. This will culminate in a one-month public event series in spring 2024, co-hosted by us and the participating organizations.

### **Overall Goals and Key Questions:**

This project aims to share our documentation of space-making practices within the Chinese community in New York. It also seeks to create a space that enhances the visibility of the intricate and unclassifiable creativity that lies behind the categorical labels affixed to these practices.

Post-Covid, there has been a notable emergence of unique cultural organizations established by the Chinese community in New York City. These organizations employ innovative approaches to create spaces for a diverse array of hybrid practices. For instance, they encompass a feminist bookstore /temple (Accent Sisters), a boutique design store that hosts Mahjong parties (Chop Suey Club), a Lacanian academic knowledge-sharing space (Sinthome), and an independent magazine serving as a platform for international artist (O1) visa applicants (Special Special). The founders of these organizations, and the projects themselves, raise intriguing questions:

How do their personal journeys influence the evolution of these spaces, from their conceptualization to the business model? What kind of communities have they cultivated, and how do these interactions lead to new developments? How do their individual intellectual and artistic experiences shape their organizational methods, which consequently form their framework for social production?

In attempting to define my research framework and identify key words, I discovered that it's not possible to neatly label these identities and practices. Their very existence is inherently creative and resists categorization, each having its unique historical background and singular individuality. Therefore, this project strives to explore the individuation process that brought them into being while delving deeper into the following questions:

What is “Chinese”? How does this common identity result in the similarities and differences of their practices? Why is organization a necessary infrastructure for these practices? How do these organizations interact with one another, catalyzing diverse developments that transform the cultural and creative urban landscape? Why is it important to document their current practices? What can we learn from them?

#### **List of Participating Organizations (hyperlinked):**

- [SLEEPCENTER](#)
- [.iidrr](#)
- [Accent Sisters & Accent Temple](#)
- [Sinthome New York](#) 圣状纽约
- [Gong Press](#) 弓出版
- [Mamahuhu](#) 马马虎虎
- [CAO \(Chinese Artists and Organizers\) Collective](#) 离离草
- [Special Special](#)
- [te editions](#)
- [Bungee Space](#)

- Northern Square 北方广场
- Chop Suey Club
- 706 New York
- ...

## **Rationale and Literature Review:**

### **1. Manuel DaLanda, *Assemblage Theory***

The purpose of this project is to first share our documentation on the process of understanding how the Chinese community in New York are using various ways of organizing to conduct space-making practices. By focusing on the process, this project does not try to define what these terms are but rather illuminate their complexities and immanent ever-changing nature.

The conceptual framework for this approach is demonstrated by assemblage theory by Manuel DaLanda, who attempts to bring different definitions from Deleuze and Guattari together. An assemblage is “a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures.” Every entity is both a part and a whole. Parts that make up a whole are not uniform in origin. They interact with one another to become new assemblage wholes by establishing relations that link between them. Most of the connections in the world are extrinsic in nature. Internal relationships are typically limited to specific contexts, like social roles defined by established customs. In order for a convention to exist, there must be different methods for defining the identity of a social role, and choices among these alternatives must be arbitrary. When an organism's behavior is innate, determined by its genetic code, and there are other possible behavioral patterns that could serve the same purpose, its identity can be seen as influenced by internal relationships.

“All assemblages are unique historical entities, singular in their individuality, not as particular members of a general category. But if this is so, then we should be able to specify the *individuation process* that gave birth to them (DaLanda).” This project starts with key terms like “space-making practices” and “Chinese” to establish the starting points of a discussion, yet unfolds their complexities by highlighting the interiority of the organizations and the very process of our own

project, to decode what could easily become a tomb archive of enclosed defined identities, which is not the case for this ever-changing New York creative cultural ecology.

Opposite concepts are not so polarizing or binary, yet they can be transformed into each other. Categories can be understood as assemblages. If one member of these dichotomies can transition into the other, then the oppositions can be replaced with a single parameterized term that can exist in two different states. This leads to a modified version of the concept of assemblage, a concept with adjustable parameters that can be configured to represent either strata or assemblages in their original sense. “The coding parameter is one of the *knobs* we must build into the concept, the other being territorialization, a parameter measuring the degree to which the components of the assemblage have been subjected to a process of homogenisation, and the extent to which its defining boundaries have been delineated and made impermeable (DaLanda, 3).” This project also aspires to also be a knob that opens up possibilities of deterritorialization and changes, to also better understand where the coding or territorialization occurred, and to “do justice to the complexity of the historical record.”

Another framework we drew from DaLanda is his notion on the diagram of an assemblage, which is “the structure of the possibility space associated with an assemblage’s dispositions.” An ensemble possesses affordances and properties that its parts do not have, which gives its own tendencies and capacities that are real but not necessarily actualized. The diagram captures this real but not actualized virtuality, by connecting “an assemblage with other diagrams, and with a cosmic space in which diagrams exist free from the constraints of actuality (DaLanda).” We will try to use an actual diagram to map out our own process in this project, to document the actualized while leaving room for the not yet actualized but virtual and potential. As we conducted interviews, got to know this community, our actions have also catalyzed collaborations and interactions among the organizations which also changes the direction of our project.

Therefore, we propose a nonlinear process-driven methodology that comprehends the intrinsic interplay of causes, rationales, and motivations that underlie the mechanisms responsible for shaping social assemblages. The assemblage theory offers a distinctive approach to bridging the gap between the micro and macro levels of social reality by emphasizing the repetition of similar assembly processes within a specific spatial scale and the recurrence of similar types of assembly processes (territorialization and coding) across various scales.

## **2. Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics***

Digital computation has become the very fabric of our physical and social infrastructures. The materiality of the digital is our body's other-half, that loops our beings into a boring technological singularity. With AI accelerating technological modernization, Yuk Hui states that every place is already global or planetary no matter how locally one wants to identify it.

According to Foucault, "site" is characterized by "relations of proximity between points or elements." The identity of spaces is formed through their social production. When the exteriority of parts delineates entities and their relationships to others, the alienation of relations becomes even more pronounced and obscured within the context of centralized and capitalized global power dynamics. There is a loss of site, or a disorientation and numbness which Heidegger calls the incapability of sense making. The algorithmic echo chambers mediascape of our time individuates us so the centralized power of control can become more transparent by becoming the very narrative itself. It seems like the first step towards recovering our senses is to re-establish the relationship with our locality, which is why this project aims to establish a platform for documentation and sharing with various layers of textual, visual, and material narratives that contribute to the context of the process.

Yuk Hui advocates for techno-diversity by proposing to replace *technics* with *cosmotechnics*, to initiate an examination on a universal understanding of technology. He draws from Heidegger's critique of modern technology, arguing that its essence is nothing technical but lies in Enframing, reducing humans' relationship to the world by reducing every being to the "standing reserve" that can be measured, calculated, and exploited. As humans become increasingly inseparable from modern technologies, Yuk Hui calls urgently for reflection upon the practices inherited from modern technology and modernity, especially the clash between two systems of epistemes if one compares it to the Chinese context, which is inherently also a spatial theoretical investigation. To interrogate the implications of technology, Hui points out the general misconception of "technology" being a universal concept, reducing all skills and products from various cultures to Western technological thought. Heidegger himself was no exception to the tendency to understand both technology and science as 'international,' in contrast to thinking which is not 'international' but unique and 'homely' (Hui). This universalism poses great obstacles to understanding the global technological condition and especially non-European cultures.

Drawing from Hui's framework, this project also serves as a database to decode this subtle perpetuation of colonialism.

### **3. Emmy Mikelson, *Space for Things: Art, Objects, and Speculation***

The title of this project draws from Anthony Vidler where he calls space as “a bad object (Mikelson)”. He emphasizes the “abilities of space itself to dissolve boundaries, as, that is, transgressive by nature, breaking the boundaries of all conventions, social or physical... a bad object - abject and ignoble in its ubiquity, endlessly invading the protected realms of society and civilization with the disruptive forces of nature.” Space as a medium possesses the possibility of dissolving meanings of general categories that are usually highly stereotyped based on socially constructed standards of exclusion.

As Mikelson outlines in this article, these exclusive meanings derive from a traditional Western-centric vertical ontology, which is based on hierarchical relationships between the subject and object, and distinctions between entities in a single, fixed, and hierarchical structure. Rethinking ontology is spatial. It is a challenge that could deterritorialize and reterritorialize our understandings of epistemology itself, as scholars like Manuel DeLanda proposed a new model of flat ontology which is “one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.” This spatial analogy of a dense and complex “field of both interaction and isolation, where things (read as human and nonhuman) are at moments drawn in relation to one another, and at moments withdrawn and discrete.”

In this way, all the organizations are making space, and thus bad objects, that cannot be subjected to a single definition. Our project itself is also a bad object that should not be limited to its material outputs like a website or publication, but a space-making process that we try to fully illustrate through book-making (or editions of art objects), public programming and so on.

### **Methodology**

#### **Process Driven Approach:**

Instead of relying on evidence and case studies to define and advocate for a specific framework, our aim is to broaden the discussion to encompass the intricacies and distinct characteristics inherent in each key word that are the birth points of this project. We intend to present a process-driven framework for the concept and methodology. To achieve this, we strive to synthesize textual, visual, and material narratives to enhance the context of our documentation. This approach highlights the journey of the project and provides the audience with additional context around the actualized

happenings which currently include a paper-based publication, a website, and a month-long public programming and events.

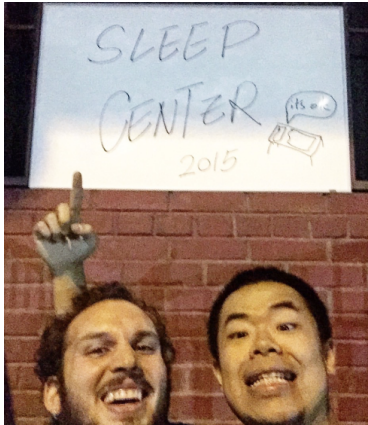
For instance, our interviews will include information such as time, location, and participants, allowing us to maintain the development of our personal relationships, which directly enriches the content itself. Some interviews were conducted by others at public events, and we will duly acknowledge and provide context for different perspectives.

Given that frameworks of identity often exhibit a Western-centric epistemological bias in their stereotypical definitions, our goal is to use the process as a means to illuminate the complexities hidden within the words, rather than relying on examples to reinforce a hierarchical ontological model. Our approach is one of assemblage, documenting the contingencies that arise from the interactions between individuals and organizations, each mutually shaping the other. This approach may allow for a degree of locality to be preserved and shared, as the locus of control has become porous and global, resulting in a loss of *site* in its locality.

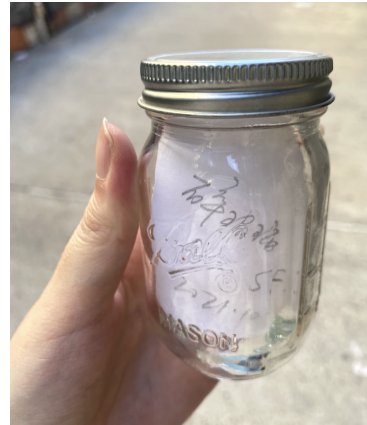
So how does our design and narrative help to recover this locality?

### **Visual Language:**

The visual language will introduce additional layers of information that go beyond what text alone can convey. To begin with, there will be accompanying photos or images that enhance the contextual understanding of each organization's practice. Typography and layout choices will further enhance the readability of the textual content. Additionally, we aimed to document one physical object that reflects certain aspects of each organization, which we visually documented for subsequent image processing, forming another layer of visual narrative within this project.



SLEEPCENTER whiteboard



Gong Press & Mamahuhu car glass

For example, the creative space SLEEPCENTER has always had a whiteboard at its door, allowing each artist or curator hosting the event to rewrite what the space is. Another example is some broken glass from the organizers of Gong Press (art publication platform) and Mamahuhu (experimental site-specific performance program), who co-hosts both projects. During their trip to LA, all of their belongings including hard drives that stored their works were stolen because robbers smashed their car windows. In this way, our documentation of their objects connects us to them, revealing the emotions and interactions that transpired during our process.

This is the object sourcing prompt (proposed by Rui):

在你们运行的空间或者组织或者社区里有没有一个实体的物件可以承载或者反应这个组织的精神？这个物件可以是一个重大发生点的痕迹，可以是一个纸片，一盆从头养到现在的植物，铁门的钥匙，第一次视频会议的笔记，或者是链接，屋顶上掉下来的一片木头，被漏水管道泡坏的杂志，最重要的一本书，存着往来信息存档的硬盘，一个离不开的机器，出租空间的lease，一张晒掉漆的椅子，一摊水渍，一碟等待排出的海报等等...

它存在或者被拥有的时间区间是什么？为什么选择它作为你们行动痕迹的理由？可以借给我一下吗？

我会通过不同的图像制作方式的来探索和记录这个物件，把它和interview一同收纳在这个catalog里，以一种证据的方式保存下来，连结组织联系存在的实体性和书这个本身的实体性。让它们一起在这个时间节点下存档，接受太阳的曝光。

In the space where you operate, within your organization or community, is there a physical object that embodies or reflects the spirit of your group? This object could be a trace of a significant event, a piece of paper, a plant nurtured from seed to now, a key to an iron gate, notes from the first video conference, or perhaps a link, a piece of wood that fell from the roof, a magazine damaged by leaking pipes, the most important book, a hard drive storing years of correspondence, an

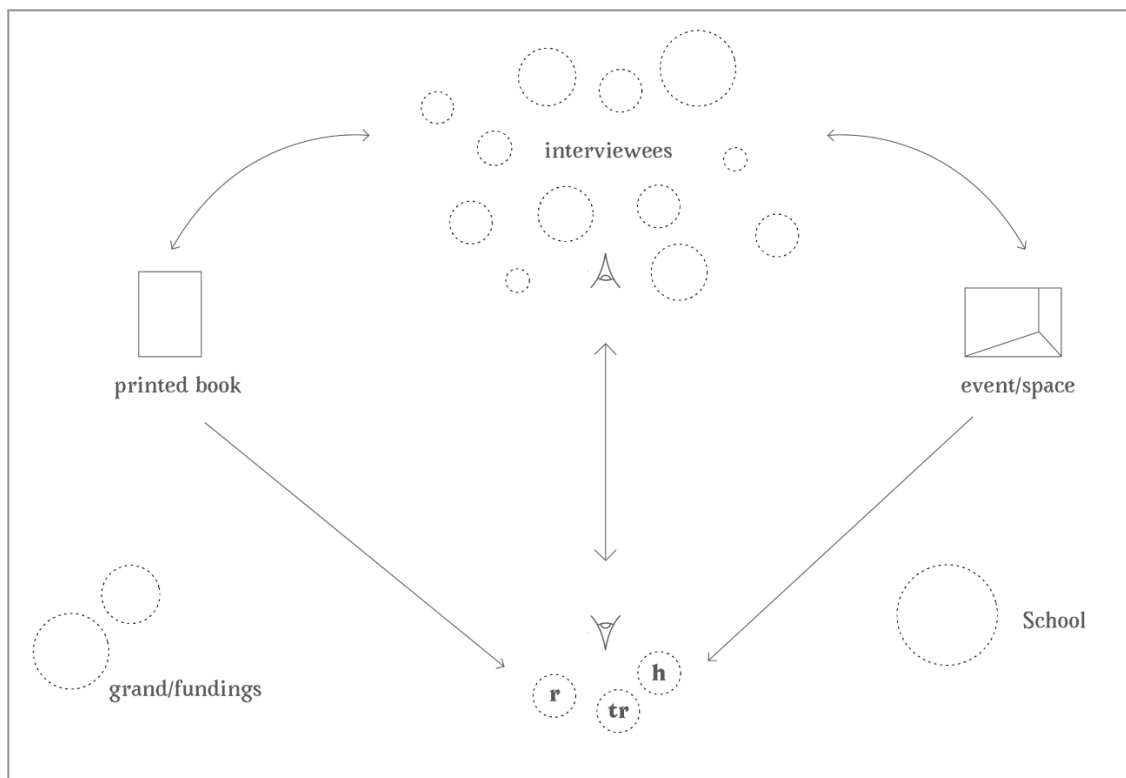


indispensable machine, a lease for your rented space, a sun-faded chair, a puddle, a stack of posters waiting to be put up, and more...

What is the span of time during which it exists or has been possessed? Why did you choose it as a memento of your actions? Would you share with me?

I will explore and document this object through various forms of imagery, preserving it alongside an interview in this catalog, like evidence, connecting the tangible existence of the organization and the physicality of the book itself. Let them be archived together at this moment in time, basking in the sun's exposure.

We will also include an "assemblage diagram" as part of this project. Since we actively participated in the events of these organizations, which is how we initially connected with many of the interviewees, the diagram aims to chart the project's progression, creating a visual narrative or map that illustrates the evolving conditions. For instance, we encountered some publication platforms at a book fair co-hosted by Accent Sisters (a speakeasy bookstore in NJ) and Bungee Space (a multi-functional bookstore in LES). During my interview with Accent Sisters, I was able to rent the creative space where I work, SLEEPCENTER, resulting in the opening of their new pop-up bookstore called Accent Temple. These occurrences align with what DeLanda refers to as the



actualized virtualities that materialized during our deterritorializing endeavors. Therefore, the diagram has the potential to illustrate these organic part-to-whole relationships and interactions that unfolded throughout the process, thus highlighting the process itself.

## Materiality & Physical Design:

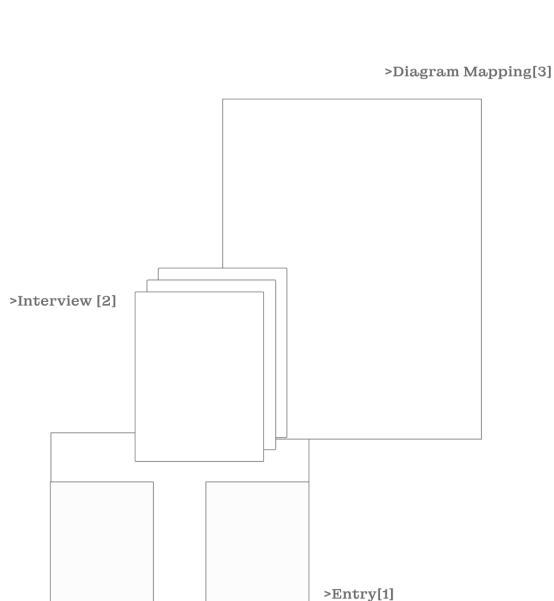
We aim for the physical design of the book to align with and complement our process-driven approach. Each organization will be treated as a separate module, unit, or pamphlet / brochure, while the collection as a whole will be contained within a folder that assembles all the materials. While there are linear contextual elements in both the textual and visual content that frame the project's progression, the modular format provides space and encourages engagement from the audience, effectively making this edition their own. They can arrange the order of the modules, incorporate new developments, and even collect postcards and photos within the folder, among other possibilities. Our hope is that the functionality integrated into the physical design will establish a more personal connection between the audience and these practices, effectively turning them into another node within the rhizome network, connecting and opening up avenues for creativity.



Moreover, this system saves us from an enclosed linear way of production. For instance, if there is a new organization, we can just produce its own module to be added, so that the physicality also allows expansion and changes instead of becoming an archival tomb.

Safety is a crucial aspect of our consideration, given that this project inherently involves active

Enter the bad object / Book structure, system



[1] entry:  
writing introducing the project

[2] content:  
12, in total, modular booklet to be insert,  
pull out, rearrange from the system.

(2-1). diagram:  
Change is the nature progression.  
The organic process of this project will be  
diagramed and hinted on each dividing  
page, narrating the relation of "us", as us  
and the interviewees, as Tianran and Rui,  
as the blurred tangent of research subject  
and the researching object.

(2-2). interview

(2-3). imagery

[3] mapping:  
poster format of the image system created  
with object prompt, 12 physical objects  
provided by the interviewees, recorded and  
printed flat laid out on one page.

practitioners, including some politically oriented organizations. The infrastructure's materiality also allows for flexibility in adapting to various circumstances. For instance, in politically sensitive environments like book fairs in mainland China, we have the option to physically remove politically sensitive content or units to ensure the safety of all parties involved, including ourselves and the rest of the organizations. Because this project aims to increase visibility by being public-facing, the design must incorporate safety and privacy measures while remaining true to its content. However, due to its process-driven nature and the diagram's archival and data visualization of the project's own progression, political organizations will still be represented using more encoded visual languages.

## Public Programming

This project took shape in the summer when I interviewed the founder of SLEEPCENTER, a creative space where I'm employed, which actively supports the local community by providing essential infrastructure, its 501c (3) and C.I.C not-for-profit certification, and the stability it offers. As the project progressed, the founder generously offered us the space for free in March or April, enabling us to launch an exhibition for this project alongside a series of public programs I plan to co-host with the participating organizations. Many of them have expressed interest, given that securing a suitable space can often be expensive and logistically challenging in New York.

For instance, Special Special, a creative studio and community platform with a diverse history since its inception in 2016, has introduced its latest endeavor: a biannual publication called 4N. This publication is tailored to New York City's international community and spotlights emerging and established foreign creatives making their mark in the United States. The magazine's purpose is to serve as a platform for the featured international and immigrant artists who are navigating the O-1 visa and Green Card processes. During our interview with the founder of Special Special, we decided to co-host an award ceremony at SLEEPCENTER. This will not only provide these featured creators with press coverage but also include an award and exhibition on their resumes.

### **Team Members:**

The project initially began as my personal exploration within this creative ecosystem. Along the way, it piqued the interest of two of my friends who decided to join in. Rui, a visual artist and graphic designer, will primarily focus on visual design and bookmaking. Hanglu takes on the roles of project manager and chief editor, overseeing material procurement and execution, particularly beneficial due to his proximity to cost-effective printing facilities in China. Given that the organization itself serves as an infrastructure that propels the social production of this project, the impact of their involvement in shaping the project will also be documented in the visual diagram.

Here's how we've divided our tasks:

- Tianran: project direction, introductory statement, seeking funding opportunities, conducting interviews, editing transcripts, and curating events.
- Rui: graphic design system, visual storytelling, book creation, interviews, and event curation.
- Hanglu: project management, editing (both in terms of theme and content), sourcing materials/paper, and overseeing production and quality control.

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